



# Association for the Preservation of the Presidential Yacht Potomac

## USS POTOMAC MINI-HISTORY

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### Florida Fishing Trip 1941

#### & The Lend-Lease Act of 1941 (The Aid to Democracies Act)

The mooring was poor, the seas rough. The Presidential Yacht, the USS Potomac, was rolling continually from 25 to 30 degrees and yawed wildly during the night of March 26, 1941, while anchored at Settlement Point in the Grand Bahama Banks southeast of Miami. Fala, America's favorite dog, was among the seasick keeping President Franklin Delano Roosevelt up most of the night.



Others suffering with temporary insomnia that night included the President's guests joining him for "The President's Inspection Trip and Cruise" aka "a fishing trip" from March 19 to April 1, 1941. Those guests included Robert H. Jackson, the Attorney General; Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior; Harry L. Hopkins, the President's personal advisor; Stephen T. Early, the President's press secretary; Maj Gen Edwin "Pa" Watson, his military aide; and Rear Adm Ross T. McIntire, the President's physician; plus secret service agents and support staff.

The party had left Washington by train from Union Station on March 19 to Port Everglades, Florida, arriving in the evening of March 20. The train was run

out onto the pier with the President's car next to the Potomac. After pausing for pictures on the dock, the President and his party transferred to the ship but decided to stay at dock that evening while an easterly wind of force 4 with heavy ground swells and rain had set in. The press had already released stories of the Potomac's departure and were upset when she instead stayed at the pier. Rumors were linked with a German submarine being offshore.

The destroyer USS Benson was waiting to follow the Potomac out to sea, where it would stay close behind with its guns manned and depth bombs and torpedoes ready in preparedness for any emergency. FDR had given orders that the Potomac should at no time be more than an eight-hour run from a United States port and the holding of three cars of the Presidential train in readiness in Miami for any emergency.

The country was not yet at war. It was a year and a half after the outbreak of the European war in September 1939 and eight months before the entrance of the U.S. to war in December 1941. In July 1940, after Britain had sustained the loss of 11 destroyers to the German Navy over a 10-day period, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill requested help from President Roosevelt, and a major foreign policy debate erupted over whether the United States should aid Great Britain or maintain strict neutrality.



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In the 1940 Presidential election campaign, FDR promised to keep America out of the war. He stated, "I have said this before, but I shall say it again; your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars." Nevertheless, Roosevelt wanted to support Britain and believed the United States should serve as a "great arsenal of democracy." Churchill pleaded, "Give us the tools and we'll finish the job."

FDR was reelected for an unprecedented third term, defeating Wendell Wilkie on Nov. 5, 1940, with 54.74% of the popular and 84.56% of the electoral votes (George Washington had set a two-term tradition). The President quickly focused on bringing the full force of the United States economic power to assist Great Britain in its lonely defense against Nazi Germany. Neutrality Acts enacted between 1935 and 1939 were designed to prevent the United States from becoming involved in foreign wars. By 1939, Congress had enacted a final Neutrality Act that placed all trade with nations at war under terms of "cash and carry" not to be transported on U.S. ships. U.S. monetary loans to belligerent nations were prohibited.

Great Britain had run out of credit and continuing support from the United States was threatened for munitions, raw materials, and food. The Neutrality Act of 1939 was in the way. FDR needed a "work around." At a press conference on Dec. 17, 1940, President Roosevelt revealed his plan to "...get rid of the silly, foolish old dollar sign" to continue and expand his support for the British war effort. Don't sell them supplies. Lease them instead. He said, "...if you lend munitions and get the munitions back at the end of the war, if they are intact, haven't been hurt – you are all right; if they have been damaged or have deteriorated or have been lost completely, it seems to me you come out pretty well if you have them replaced by the fellow to whom you have lent them."

On Dec. 29, 1940, in one of his historic Fireside Chats (Nr. 16) he told the nation that if Great Britain goes down, all the Americas would be living at the point of a gun – a gun loaded with explosive bullets, economic as well as military. He said, "We must be the great arsenal of democracy. For us this is an emergency as serious as war itself. We must apply ourselves to our task with the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war."

The Aid to Democracies Act (Lend-Lease Act) passed Congress on March 11, 1941. The President signed it one and a half hours later. The next day he recommended a \$7 billion appropriations bill to fund the Lend-Lease authorization. In transmitting the funding request, he declared, "It's the fixed policy of this Government to make for democracies every gun, plane and munitions of war that we possibly can."

One week later, he left to board the USS Potomac in Florida for much needed rest and recreation after the stresses of the election and overcoming the country's isolation with the passage of the Lend-Lease Act.

With heavy swells and intermittent rain, The USS Potomac finally officially started its "inspection" trip with a delayed 9:30 AM departure on Friday, March 21 to clear the dock for the Havana railroad ferry. For several days, the Potomac with its escort USS Benson enjoyed some good days fishing and others with stormy waters.

After its sleep deprived night on March 26, the President, his party and Fala awoke to better weather and calmer seas. The ship was underway at 7:10 AM to rendezvous with the Navy mail plane en route from Miami and to go alongside the Benson for sorely needed bread, water and ice. Included in the mail plane pouch to be signed by the President on the Potomac was H.R. 4050 passed by Congress appropriating a lump sum \$7 billion to fund the Lend-Lease act enacted earlier in the month. This was the largest peace-time appropriation for military purposes in the country's history.

All members of the President's party were present in the Potomac's cabin when Chief Yeoman Terry brought the contents of the pouch to the President shortly before 11 AM. Steve Early sent out the following press release from the ship's communication room:



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At 10:50 AM, EST, the President signed H.R. 4050, an Act of Congress making supplemental appropriations for the national defense and to provide aid to the government of any country whose defense the President deems vital to the defense of the United States. The total amount of this bill is seven billion dollars, to remain available until June 30, 1943. Present in the cabin of the Potomac when the President affixed his signature to this most important measure were Attorney General Jackson, Secretary Ickes, Mr. Stephen Early, General Watson, Admiral McIntire and Mr. Harry Hopkins. The President presented to Mr. Hopkins the pen with which he had approved the bill.

It was a big day for Harry Hopkins. Later, his 7.5-pound mackerel and his 6-pound tuna took honors for first and second largest catch of the day. Mr. Hopkins had been FDR's personal envoy to meet with Prime Minister Churchill to orchestrate the U.S.-British wartime alliance. He also exercised effective control over the Lend-Lease program, making sure it was in alignment with the President's foreign policy goals.

The funding of the Lend-Lease program on the USS Potomac was the first of a program which ended on Sept. 20, 1945. A total of \$50.1 billion (equivalent to \$719 billion in 2021) worth of supplies was shipped, or 17% of the total U.S. war expenditures. In all, \$31.4 billion went to the United Kingdom, \$11.3 billion to the Soviet Union, \$3.2 billion to France, \$1.6 billion to China and the remaining \$2.6 billion to other allies. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Soviet Marshall Georgy Zhukov both stated that Lend-Lease enabled the Soviet Union to defeat Germany on the Eastern Front.

After more fishing and adventures, the USS Potomac returned to Port Everglades in Florida. On March 30, the President and those who had been with him, including Fala, throughout the "inspection" cruise left the Potomac and went aboard the waiting train on the dock alongside.

After several stops on the train route home, the President's train arrived at the Union Station in Washington D.C. at 8:30 AM, April 1, 1941.

The Presidential Yacht USS Potomac had played another important role in the country's history.